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Libraries Address #MeToo

by Jennifer A. Dixon

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Somerville Public Library's Books and Brews book club discusses a #MeToo author

Photo credit: Cassandra Graesser

The #MeToo movement—originated by activist and community organizer Tarana Burke in 2006 and gaining new traction since October 2017—has sparked intense and important global conversation about sexual harassment, assault, and violence. With waves of reports bringing to light abuses in industries like entertainment, literature, and politics, libraries are uniquely situated to offer trusted spaces for learning and discussion on these issues.

EMPOWERING THROUGH INFORMATION

For many libraries, developing resource guides and educational events fits well into their overall mission of information access. In Stockbridge, MA, the Stockbridge Museum, Library and Archives recently partnered with a local domestic violence and sexual assault services organization, the Elizabeth Freeman Center, to present a two-part discussion series in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April. The theme of the programming, “embrace your voice,” focused on listening to survivors and vocally acknowledging them and offering support. The presentations covered resources about sexual assault and its impacts, and addressed how individuals could become change agents. According to Stockbridge Library Association director Katie O'Neill, the events attracted a small but engaged group, and included “a different set of people from those who usually attend our programs.” She said, “even if we connected one of two of those people with resources that they needed,” the events were a success. “The more that we can talk about [sexual assault] and make people aware...this doesn't just impact women; it's not about just one person.” The library also committed to engaging with the topic through an April book display, including titles like *The Rape Recovery Handbook: Step-by-step Help for*

Survivors of Sexual Assault (New Harbinger) and Jon Krakauer's *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* (Anchor). The King County Library System (KCLS) in Washington has also developed a centralized #MeToo resource guide that connects patrons with information they need. The guide acknowledges that "it's not always easy to know where to turn for resources on such a difficult topic," and lists "Where to turn" contacts for local and national support and advocacy organizations. The guide also suggests a handful of titles written by survivors of sexual harassment, like *Hunger* by Roxane Gay (Harper Perennial), with a focus on including multiple perspectives and marginalized voices. "Our hope...was to reach out to residents in the KCLS service area who might not otherwise feel comfortable coming to the reference desk at the libraries to ask for help," said Tess Mayer, KCLS director of library outreach, programs, and services. She characterized the library's goal as creating "communities of belonging." Public libraries are not the only institutions developing programming to address #MeToo. The Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, for example, organized a February event entitled "metoo: Truths and Consequences," featuring a panel of Harvard scholars. The *Harvard Crimson* also reported that the Schlesinger Library team has plans to document and archive materials related to the #MeToo movement. The Kraemer Family Library at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs hosted a "Just Talk: #MeToo" conversation event. At these and other libraries, library leaders have teamed up with local experts or organizations to foster well-informed and respectful conversations.

HANDLING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Adding new offerings, and spotlighting existing ones, is not the only ways that #MeToo impacts libraries: there's also the issue of what to do about titles by the accused harassers and events featuring them, especially those acquired or arranged before the news broke. For example, the "Books and Brews" book club through the Somerville Public Library in Massachusetts recently selected Aziz Ansari's *Modern Romance: An Investigation* (Penguin Pr.) as its February read. The book was announced as the winner of a significant majority in an online vote just days before the release of an article accusing Ansari of sexual misconduct. According to Lilly Sundell-Thomas, outreach and programming librarian, a member of the club's Facebook group posted a link to that article and asked if the selection would change. She said, "We initially weren't sure what we were going to do. We talked it over with our administrators and with each other, and then decided we didn't want to change the title." Doing so would have overruled the majority selection of the book club and would place the librarians in the position of dodging a controversial topic while censoring patrons' reading choices. Ultimately, approximately 40 people attended the *Modern Romance* book club meeting and were very interested in discussing it. Although the librarians did let attendees know to approach them if the conversation made them uncomfortable, the conversation stayed civil and engaged throughout the event. Cassandra Graesser, also an outreach and programming librarian, recalled, "One person even said they were bragging to their friends that their book club talks about real issues." Graesser noted, "We were surprised that

people still did really want to talk about the content of the book. It's not like they just sat down immediately and started talking about the article." The conversation prompts did include questions about the impact of the article on their perception of Ansari and his book. They included "How did the recent Babe.net article affect how you read this book? Had the story not come out, would you have enjoyed the book more?" and "Do you think that art can—or even should—be separated from the artist? Is it possible to avoid having an artist's biography influence the way we see his or her work? Or does doing so excuse inappropriate and sometimes reprehensible behavior?" The librarians overseeing the meeting went into the discussion prepared, having discussed concerns with patrons and colleagues as well as connecting with a health services coordinator and local resources. Not all libraries, however, have moved forward with plans for events focusing on problematic authors. The Cambridge Public Library, MA, recently announced that it had canceled a Summer Reading Kick-Off featuring Junot Díaz, whom several women have accused of bullying and sexual misconduct. The Teton County Library (TCL) in Jackson, WY, also recently canceled a presentation by Díaz for its Page to Podium series. TCL director Valerie Maginnis described the decision to cancel as "difficult and deliberate," undertaken with input from the library staff and with an eye to current events. Maginnis emphasized the importance of the library's policies on fostering kindness and respect. In addition, TCL has announced plans for a discussion program with the Community Safety Network, a local organization that provides a safe space for those dealing with sexual violence and harassment. Both Cambridge and TCL still offer multiple copies of Díaz's works in their catalogs, and Maginnis told *LJ* that future books by Díaz or any other author accused of misconduct would simply go through the usual collection development process, looking at literary merit, reviews, the collections of peer libraries, and the interests of the local community. Librarians consistently told *LJ* that this #MeToo oriented programming is consistent with all of the efforts to respond to current issues and the interests of their communities in addressing them. Whether through resource guides and making sure that useful information is readily accessible for those who need it, or active discussion groups and presentations, librarians have responded to #MeToo by ensuring their patrons have opportunities to learn and engage with the issue of sexual harassment.

#MeToo
